



Evans, E. (2016). Feminist Allies and Strategic Partners: Exploring the Relationship between the Women's Movement and Political Parties. *Party Politics*, 22(5), 631-640.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068816654322>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1177/1354068816654322](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068816654322)

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Feminist Allies and Strategic Partners:

Exploring the Relationship between the Women's Movement and Political Parties

Abstract

Western political parties have been in decline in recent decades and they continue to be viewed as male institutions. Despite this, electoral politics is important to the women's movement as a means by which to advance feminist interests. This article builds upon feminist critiques of political parties by analyzing original qualitative data undertaken with feminists in the US and UK in order to explore how activists view political parties. The research finds that although many hold negative views, in line with broader debates concerning disengagement, they also recognize the importance of electoral politics and the need to work with individual politicians. Party and feminist ideology shapes those views, whereby politicians on the left are viewed as feminist allies and those on the right are framed as strategic partners.

Keywords: US and UK Parties; women's movement; feminism

Introduction

Good relationships between the women's movement and political parties are (largely) to the benefit of both: the latter profit from greater representative legitimacy, whilst the former can influence policies and campaigns (Lovenduski, 2005). The women's movement is currently in resurgence across the western world, with grassroots activism occurring beyond

the legislative sphere (Weldon, 2012; Maddison and Sawyer, 2013). Conversely, political parties are widely considered to be in decline; with disengagement fuelled by ideological centralization and professionalization (Mair, 2005; Whiteley, 2011). The male-dominated nature of political parties and the relative lack of attention paid to women's issues are additional reasons for feminist critiques (Young, 2000). Received wisdom concerning the close relationship between feminists and parties of the left (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993), has been called into question by studies that have explored the extent to which parties on the right can and do represent women's interests (Cott, 1984; Celis and Childs, 2012), making it less clear which parties (if any) feminists might choose to align themselves to. This research considers feminist attitudes to political parties in the US and UK, in doing so it speaks to wider debates concerning the decline of political parties and feminist critiques of parties as male institutions. This article has four central findings: 1) that feminist activists, particularly in the UK, are largely disengaged with party politics; 2) that despite high levels of disengagement, there is continued support for the association of the women's movement with leftist parties; 3) feminists are much more willing to identify individual politicians, particularly those on the left, as feminist; and 4) individual politicians on the right are also identified as having a role to play in the representation of women's interests.

Political scientists have observed a growing disengagement with parties in the west: in part this can be explained by increasing ideological centralization and a tendency towards professionalization that has left them unresponsive to the views of voters, members and activists (Mair, 2005; Hajnal and Lee, 2011; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012). These debates are nothing new, indeed 'scathing denunciations' of political parties are a leitmotif

of modern political history (Scarrow, 2002: 1). Whilst, scholars have acknowledged the claims that parties are too far removed from the citizenry, they have also countered claims that political parties no longer have a role to play in modern politics. Research illustrates that parties continue to resonate with popular opinion (Hetherington, 2001) and that they are sustained by their adaptability to changing social and economic environments (Webb, 1995; Enyedi, 2014). For some on the left, political parties constitute hollowed out institutions that no longer adequately fulfil their representative function, particularly in the wake of economic and democratic crises (Harvey, 2005; Castells, 2012). This article illustrates that feminist activists, widely considered to be on the political left, also articulate this sense of disengagement. Of course, their views of political parties are also shaped by the extent to which parties are considered to be 'institutionally sexist' (Lovenduski, 2005: 57-58).

Feminist analyses of political parties have tended to focus on their failure to adequately represent women: either descriptively, in terms of the number of elected women present, or substantively, the extent to which they pursue policy goals that advance women's interests (Young, 2000). Feminizing a political party is complicated: there is no 'one size fits all' approach to include, promote and advance women and women's interests (Kittilson, 2006: 2). Furthermore, whether that descriptive and/or substantive representation articulated by parties is *feminist*, is central to understanding how responsive parties are to the women's movement (Childs, 2008). Of course, structural opportunities and constraints of the party system shape the responsiveness of parties to feminist interests (Kittilson, 2006). For instance, creating competition amongst parties, in terms of capturing women's

votes and claim-making vis-à-vis women's policies, could in theory encourage parties to be innovators with regards women's policies (Kantola and Squires, 2012). However, the organization of political parties, policies pursued and candidate selection are all underpinned by masculine norms (Kenny, 2013). which reinforces female exclusion and male dominance (Lovenduski, 2005). This article argues that these critiques resonate with feminist activists.

Party ideology, the ideas and policies espoused by the party organization and politicians, also help influence individual level attitudes: indeed, previous research has highlighted how party ideology and feminist ideology shape feminist attitudes (Lovenduski, 2005). Despite well-observed ties between US and UK women's organizations and parties of the left (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993; Young, 2000); the women's movement has at times distanced itself from political parties (Gelb, 1986), emphasizing its non-partisan character (Sapiro, 1986).ⁱ Moreover, the received wisdom that feminists are natural allies of leftist parties has not always been borne out by historical analysis (Cott, 1984). Women have long been active within conservative movement politics (Schreiber, 2014), whilst party ideology on women's rights can change: for instance, the Republicans used to be more pro-choice and more supportive of campaigns for the Equal Rights Amendment than the Democrats (Williams; 2011; Wolbrecht, 2000: 3).ⁱⁱ However, during periods of partisan polarization leftist parties are traditionally more sympathetic to women's concerns, for instance during the Reagan and Thatcher administrations (Bashevkin, 1994). The parallel with today's partisan context, particularly in the US, is striking. Indeed, the Republican's 'War on Women', largely constituting of attacks on reproductive rights, does not make it an obvious

site within which to pursue feminist goals. Meanwhile, the UK's Conservative party have been attacked by women's organizations for failing to account for gender in their budgets; although the party has, at least rhetorically, sought to address women's concerns (Childs and Webb, 2011).ⁱⁱⁱ As such, analysis has explored how parties of the right articulate a conservative form of feminism (Celis and Childs, 2012). Thus, we can see the potential for party ideology to shape the interaction between which *types* of parties the women's movement may choose to work with, especially in the US. However, party ideology is not fixed and does not preclude pragmatic partnerships. This research finds that traditional partisan patterns shape contemporary feminist attitudes towards political parties, although some feminists recognize the importance of forming strategic alliances with those on the right.

If party ideology can have a significant impact on attitudes towards political parties then so too must feminist ideology. Research has shown the continued importance of radical and socialist feminism for UK activists; in the US, the influence of black feminism is notable, as is the lack of any feminist ideological identification (Evans, 2015). There are some assumptions we might make regarding the influence of feminist ideology: we might expect those who identify as radical feminists to view parties as traditional sites of male dominance (Millett, 1970); black feminists to be critical of parties that have not sought to address issues of inclusion (Leighley, 2005); socialist feminists to be more likely to engage with parties that either explicitly articulate a socialist position or broader leftist agenda (Gelb, 1986); liberal feminists to be most likely to seek to work within existing institutions in order to bring about reform (Young, 2000); whilst those who lack a clear feminist ideology may also be less

willing to identify as partisan. At the same time, it is also the case that certain types of feminism are more 'easily accommodated' by political parties than others (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993: 134). Lisa Young has argued that a 'defining characteristic' of the US women's movement is its emphasis on electoral and party politics (2000: 27). Whilst this may be true for large women's organizations it is not clear whether or not this also reflects the views of grassroots activists, or whether such an interpretation works in a UK context.

Methods

The research adopts a paired comparative method in order to provide a rich and detailed analysis of qualitative data that goes beyond the exploration of a single case study (Tarrow, 2010). Undertaking comparative analysis of feminist attitudes towards political parties is interesting largely because of the differences in systems, parties and political opportunities in the US and UK. In gauging levels of partisan identification, voters in the US can identify as independent rather than with one of the two main parties^{iv}, whereas in the UK voters are typically invited to select from a list of parties or to select none at all. Money plays a significant role in US elections, something that has arguably entrenched an elite bias in party organization (Stratmann, 2005), whereas UK parties (although far from being models of mass participation) do at least still rely on local party activists (Fisher, 2014). Whilst US federalism, in theory, allows for more windows of opportunity to influence state-level parties (Robertson, 2012), the more centralized UK system means much party business is directed from Westminster (Davidson and Elstub, 2014) providing a focus for feminist lobbying. Exploring the views of feminists towards political parties in two such different

contexts allows us to also reflect upon the impact that systems have on attitudes towards political parties.

Traditionally, attitudinal studies of political parties are quantitative: this article takes a different methodological approach by utilizing qualitative interviews in order to provide a rich illustrative account of feminist attitudes. Such an approach is helpful in this particular area as it allows for a more fulsome exploration of the kinds of ideas and issues that emerge when discussing parties with activists. Furthermore, it also affords an opportunity to consider how party and feminist ideology interact with individual political attitudes in order to shape the participant's views. The data explored in this article comprises of a set of original qualitative interviews undertaken with feminist activists and those involved with campaigning for women's representation.^v Interviews were conducted with 73 feminist activists who worked for or were a part of large or local feminist networks in the US and UK. Ensuring interviews were undertaken with feminists working in both grassroots and national organizations was important; not least because whether or not the activists worked closely with politicians could influence their views of political parties. Interviews were undertaken across 6 cities: London, Bristol and Glasgow; and New York, Portland (Oregon) and Washington D.C. These cities were selected in order to cover areas where the majority of formal political activity occurs but also to ensure the inclusion of voices from smaller cities; Bristol and Portland were selected as well known 'hubs' of feminist activity and to provide a contrast with the metropolitan populations of London and New York.

The interviews were conducted between January 2012 and March 2014, lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were fully transcribed. Interviewees were recruited via initial email contact with local feminist groups and national organizations. The interviewees' activism manifested itself in a number of ways: the majority regularly participated in local feminist groups; others focused on specific themes such as reproductive justice or sexual objectification; whilst some attended events but were more active in online feminist forums and campaigning. In some instances a 'snowballing technique' was adopted, whereby interviewees suggested contacting named individuals. The interviewees came from a wide variety of backgrounds and every effort was made to ensure diversity in terms of sex, gender, age, race, class and sexuality; this is where snowballing was of particular use in helping to identify individuals from under-represented groups (Noy, 2008).^{vi} Interviewees were asked whether they identified with a political party with follow up questions probing their views on political parties.^{vii} Full anonymity was guaranteed to those participating in the research.

Given that this article explores the influence of feminist ideology on attitudes towards political parties, participants were also asked how they defined their own feminism and their answers were coded according to whether or not they had *explicitly* identified with a specific strand; for instance one interviewee might define her feminism as radical, whereas another might choose to focus on issues rather than on ideologies. This meant those who did identify with a specific ideology had done so freely and consciously, rather than selecting from a pre-determined list; however, this also meant that there were some who

did not identify with a specific ideology at all or with more than one strand (see appendix A for a full breakdown).

Attitudes towards Political Parties

The British Social Attitudes survey reports an ongoing decline in the percentage of the population who identify with a political party (currently 76% of the population); a recent estimate put Labour on 36%, Conservative on 27% and the Liberal Democrats on 6%.^{viii} In the US, where registered independents are on the rise, one recent Gallup poll indicated that 42% of voters identified as independent, 31% as Democrat and 25% as Republican.^{ix} Such results reflect broader patterns in partisan dealignment in both the UK (Curtice, 2010) and the US (Dalton, 2011). During the interviews, participants were asked if they identified with a political party.

Table 1: Interviewees party identification

Country	Party	Number of interviewees
US	Democrat	15
	Independent	18
	Freedom Socialist Party	1

UK	Labour	8
	Liberal Democrat	2
	Green	2
	Left Unity	1
	None	26

As table 1 indicates, none of the US participants identified as Republican; likewise, none of the UK interviewees identified as Conservative. The remaining two thirds either said that they had voted for different parties at different times or that they didn't feel strongly enough about any of the political parties to identify with one.

For those who identified with a political party, it was clear that party ideology, and to a lesser extent feminist ideology, was important, although the interaction played out differently in the US and UK. The historic and contemporary role played by Labour in advancing women's interests was highlighted by several UK interviewees. UK interviewees who identified as liberal or socialist were more likely to identify with a political party than UK interviewees who identified with no ideology or as radical or queer. Interviewees who

identified with a political party argued that parties constitute a critical site within which feminists can bring about change:

I'm a member of the Labour party. I'm not very active at the moment but I have been to women's conferences and I think they're a really important place to push forward a feminist agenda. (London)

I vote Labour. If you look at the party, for all its faults, they do at least seem to take women's issues seriously. They introduced quotas so they have more women in the party, which is important. (Glasgow)

As the above quotations indicate, UK interviewees who identified with a particular party perceived them to provide an important means by which to advance women's issues. Moreover, other interviewees who expressed similar views argued that engaging with electoral politics was important to pursuing a feminist policy agenda.

For the US interviewees identification with the Democrats was largely driven by a rejection of the Republicans. In short they identified as Democrat more as a rejection of the Republicans rather than as a positive embracement of the Democrats, as summed up by one interviewee from Portland: 'Well, I definitely call myself a Democrat because who else is going to oppose the GOP and their regressive views on women.' So for her, identifying with the Democrats is a means by which to help oppose Republican policy. Such an approach

underscores the impact that differing party systems have on attitudes in the US and UK; when one party in a two party system is espousing anti-feminist views then identification with the other party would seem logical. Conversely, in the UK where there are more viable parties to choose between, some interviewees opted for smaller parties that they felt paid more attention to women's issues: 'I joined the Green Party awhile ago [...] the mainstream parties just don't seem to be very women-friendly spaces' (Bristol). Hence, a multi-party system provides greater choice and opportunity for smaller parties to take a lead in areas not necessarily considered 'core' policy issues; this finding supports feminist research which has identified the positive impact that wider electoral competition can have on the responsiveness of political parties to women's interests (Kantola and Squires, 2012).

From an initial reading of the numbers of those identifying with political parties it would be tempting to argue that party ideology has the most important impact on determining levels of support amongst feminists. It is, for instance telling that none of the interviewees identified with the parties on the right in either the US or UK; although this is hardly surprising given the GOP's War on Women and the impact that the Conservative-led coalition's (2010-2015) cuts have had on women. Beyond the fact that the interviews were undertaken in cities that could broadly be identified as being on the left politically, it is perhaps also the case that conservative women are less likely to be either working for women's organizations or involved with grassroots campaigns. Rather the push for conservative feminism appears to come largely from high profile business women, right wing journalists or politicians.^x To some extent then this research provides contemporary support for past studies which have found feminists and the women's movement to have

closer ties to the left (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993; Young, 2000). That said, what is perhaps most striking is the 18 US interviewees who identified as Independent and the 26 British who did not identify with any party.

The reasons given by those who did not identify with a political party appeared to be most clearly shaped by both feminist ideology and the wider disengagement with political parties expressed by those on the left. Indeed, the two factors were closely intertwined in the responses of radical feminists, black feminists and US socialist feminists. For instance, those who identified as radical feminist were not only more likely to critique parties as bastions of male dominance but they also argued that parties, as opposed to grassroots activism, did not constitute an adequate site for radical change:

I couldn't really compromise my politics by signing up to a party agenda. Feminism and women are always side-lined within them. Anyway, I'd rather focus on grassroots activism which is where the real politics happens. (New York)

It's never really occurred to me to join a party. I'm not really sure what I'd get out of it and my energy goes into my feminist activism, I'm focused on helping the most vulnerable women not sitting around talking about what goes on in Westminster. Anyway, as far as I can tell all the parties seem to be dominated by men. (Bristol)

I'm a registered independent; I'm interested in the issue and the candidate not which team I support (New York, US)

Oh, I can't be doing with political parties. They say one thing and then do another when they get some power. As far as I can tell none of them seem very interested in feminist issues. (Glasgow)

So for these interviewees, there was not only a feminist critique of parties as institutions run by, for and in the interests of men, but there was also a sense that *real* politics affecting women's lives took place outside of electoral and legislative spheres. This chimes with research which has highlighted the importance for the women's movement to pursue change in sites beyond the legislative sphere (Weldon, 2012). Parties were viewed as 'hollowed out' institutions, a view reflected in some critical analyses of political parties (Crouch, 2014). By way of contrast, volunteering for a refuge or a running a local campaign were considered to be more effective ways of undertaking political activism. The type of feminist activism that interviewees were engaged with interacted with feminist ideology; specifically, those who identified as radical or queer feminists were the least likely to be those working for large national organizations who regularly work with political parties.

Some interviewees spoke explicitly about the extent to which political parties only seek to represent mainstream concerns, for instance one interviewee from Portland argued that parties were explicitly driven by 'patriarchal capitalist interests.' There was little sense

amongst these interviewees that parties could be sites for substantive feminist change because the parties themselves were too invested in maintaining current power dynamics. Furthermore, some interviewees argued that parties were driven by electoral demands rather than any real ideological interest in feminism. When asked why they were not members or registered supporters of political parties, a common response was that they would rather channel their energies into their feminism:

I don't want to be involved with a party, you know just go to fundraisers? I mean I do that already for feminist groups that are really struggling for money (Portland)

I vote because it's important and women fought for us to have the right to vote but I only have limited time and I choose to focus on women not on party politics (London).

As the above quotations indicate, for these feminists involvement with a political party would require additional resources; the US interviewees raised the importance of party fundraising as being particularly off-putting in terms of getting involved. The amount of individual and collective resources that sustains feminist activism was considered to be such that many interviewees argued that 'it was not possible' to devote time to other forms of political activism. Therefore, limited resources had led many to focus their activism in sites other than party politics. Beyond resource-side issues, interviewees were also reluctant to

participate in political party campaigning because, for them, it symbolized unnecessary ideological compromise:

I couldn't really be that involved with a party; you have to make compromises, you have to be pragmatic, you have to toe the party line. There are certain issues that I couldn't compromise on (New York)

I think the problem with our politicians and political parties is that they're all the same – they're in it for themselves. I think I can do more good for women outside of Westminster (London).

The emphasis on party discipline and loyalty was problematic for interviewees in both the US and UK. Parties were viewed as pragmatic institutions in contrast to feminism which was presented as more ideologically 'pure', as one interviewee noted: 'parties have to be something to everyone and therefore nothing to people like me who actually care about things'. Some interviewees expressed outright hostility towards political parties and in particular to the idea that they use women's issues to score political points.

We shouldn't necessarily be surprised that many of the interviewees did not identify with a political party, nor that those who worked for large national organizations were less likely to be critical of politicians and parties. Feminist critiques of political parties and formal political

institutions continue to have purchase with activists who sometimes perceive parties to be male institutions run by men and in the interests of men (Kittilson, 2006; Evans, 2015). Interviewees on both sides of the Atlantic also articulated a sense of distance and disengagement with political parties; something considered to be a challenge for parties (Mair, 2005). Although being able to identify as independent offered an opportunity for feminists in the US to register their rejection of the two main parties without necessarily rejecting electoral politics.

For those UK interviewees who identified with a political party, party ideology played a central role: in particular the historic contribution that the Labour party had made in advancing women's rights, this was not so obvious in discussions concerning the Democrats. Party systems and ideology also had a role to play in shaping the views of the activists with some in the US identifying as Democrat simply as a means by which to resist the Republicans. In other words, those who identified as Democrat did so because they were the least worst option. In the UK, despite the presence of more successful minor parties, there was still a perception that the parties were all fairly similar. With regards feminist ideology, radical feminists in the US and UK were most likely to be critical of parties, whilst the socialist feminists in the UK were more likely to identify with Labour than socialist feminists in the US who tended to identify as independent.

Of course party identification alone cannot provide us with a full account of the attitudes of feminist activists towards political parties. For instance, it was clear during discussions with

the interviewees that many who had expressed hostility towards political parties also recognized the role that politicians play in helping to advance their agenda. As such, the article now explores the ways in which feminists view working with political parties, even when they have seemingly little ideological common ground.

Working with Political Parties

All mainstream parties in the US and UK have women's groups or caucuses, variously committed to: helping target women voters; promoting women's candidacy for electoral office; advocating 'women-friendly' policies; and providing networking, support and leadership opportunities for women in the party (Childs, 2008; Childs and Kittilson in this issue; Wolbrecht, 2000). For sure, these groups sometimes have long-standing links to external women's groups and to the wider women's movement; however, there is also scope for activists to work bilaterally with politicians, party factions and the party leadership. Despite the opposition to political parties that some participants had expressed, it was clear from the interviews and from wider analysis of the feminist movement that activists are willing to work with political parties, where necessary; this was not restricted just to those who had identified with a political party. These relationships took one of two forms: 1) there were those individual politicians, typically Labour and the Democrats who were viewed as feminist allies and who broadly espoused a progressive agenda for women, such as being pro-choice and in favor of equal opportunities; and 2) there were also those who could be viewed as strategic partners, typically those on the right who did not usually advocate or seek to claim to represent women's interests but who nonetheless advocated for specific policies which (some) feminists had long campaigned for.

Feminist allies

During the interviews there were some who named individual politicians, those ‘critical actors’ who were identified as having acted on behalf of women in order to bring about women-friendly change (Childs and Krook, 2006). Those parties who were perceived to espouse women-friendly policies were (mainly) the Democrat or Labour parties; this was also true for individual politicians who were explicitly identified as feminist:

I have a lot of time for Harriet Harman and Stella Creasy [*both Labour MPs*]; they’ve been willing to take a stand on feminist issues and helped raise the profile of issues that affect women (London)

Well there are the big names who are well-known for campaigning on women’s and feminist issues that we work with closely, people like Nancy Pelosi [*D, California 12th and House Minority Leader*] and Rosa DeLauro [*D, Connecticut 3rd*]. We also worked closely with Carolyn Maloney [*D, NY 4th*] on sexual violence on campus.^{xi} (Washington DC)

Some of those interviewees who had been critical of political parties were able to identify a specific feminist politician, which suggests that reframing the relationship as being one between the women’s movement and individual politicians is another way of understanding feminist attitudes. For instance, Wendy Davis, the Democrat Texan State Senator for the 10th district, undertook an 11 hour filibuster to block proposals to ban abortions after 20 weeks; such an act of representation meant she was cited by several interviewees as a feminist politician who had acted on behalf of women, as one interviewee from Portland

articulated: 'When I think of Wendy Davis it just makes me want to cry, knowing that she was there standing in for all those women who couldn't be there and we were all cheering her on.' That Wendy Davis, a politician elected to the state rather than national legislature, should be cited by feminists in Portland and New York is testament to the impact that her act of representation had around the US; indeed, the actions of Davis went viral.^{xii} We might also think about those women politicians who have sought to advance feminist campaigns and issues. For instance Green MP Caroline Lucas wore a No More Page 3 t-shirt in the House of Commons chamber in order to support the campaign which is trying to get *The Sun* daily newspaper to remove its topless picture of a woman on page 3.^{xiii}

The interviewees were more positive when discussing feminist politicians, rather than political parties (none of the interviews argued that any party was a feminist party). Such a response was explained both by the under representation of women in all political parties (although many recognized that some parties have a better record when it comes to numbers of women) and by a perception that women's issues are not taken seriously by political parties, except for when they are chasing the votes of women. This approach fits with critiques of political parties as male institutions where both women and women's issues are largely absent (Lovenduski, 2005; Kittilson, 2006). When talking about feminist agendas then it was clear that participants of all feminist and partisan ideological persuasions were engaged with a more individual appraisal of politicians and did not appear to view them as representative of their wider party. The negative comments that many had expressed regarding political parties were largely absent during the discussions of feminist politicians; this was equally true in the US and UK. And yet there was still some skepticism

on the part of grassroots activists regarding the role of feminist politicians, who were viewed as both remote from the wider movement and with conflicting loyalties which compromised their ability to fully represent feminist interests. Such an interpretation positions the politicians as *feminist allies*, rather than as say feminist politicians or indeed feminist critical actors, thus reflecting the detachment and antipathy that some activists expressed vis-à-vis formal politics.

Strategic partners

Despite frequent overlaps between the approaches of leftist parties and national women's organizations to women's issues, the latter tend not to affiliate to political parties. For instance the two most prominent US and UK women's civil society organizations, the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Fawcett Society are, at least notionally non-partisan. However, the reality is that the Democratic party has traditionally proven to be a more receptive home for lobbying by women's organizations such as NOW (Freeman, 1987), whilst in the UK the Fawcett Society has come under fire from Conservative women for its suspected links to leftist parties and its high profile attacks on the Government.^{xiv} Indeed, as this article has argued, feminist activists are more likely to identify with leftist parties. Interviews with those feminists who worked for national women's organizations reiterated the importance of being non or bi-partisan:

It's really important to us to maintain our non-partisan status but we also have to focus on the issues and sometimes it's easy to present us as being an adjunct to the Democrats. (Washington DC)

We have to be careful about what we can and can't say in order to maintain our neutrality and that can mean stepping back a bit [...] we want to see more women elected across the political spectrum and so work with all parties on that. (London)

Maintaining a non-partisan status allows women's organizations the opportunity, at least in theory, to be able to influence all parties. This is self-evident when we consider the need for a permanent profile for women's groups, regardless of which party is in office. Such a position also means that the potential for working with politicians and parties who are traditionally less well disposed to a feminist agenda is kept alive. Indeed, some interviewees claimed that certain anti-feminist politicians and party factions might be of more strategic use vis-à-vis specific policy issues, particularly those controversial issues that tend to divide feminist opinion.

Contentious issues such as pornography or prostitution divide the women's movement; with radical feminists on both sides of the Atlantic more likely to advance abolitionist approaches. On these kinds of issues, less traditional alliances are sometimes made between radical feminists and politicians on the conservative right, who seek the same policy ends but are motivated by very different beliefs and attitudes. A willingness on the part of radical feminists to work with conservative politicians may appear surprising; however, it is instructive in so far as it reveals that the radicalism driving their feminism is focused more on the ends than the means. In other words, whilst radical feminists were those most likely to be critical of political parties per se and for the most part refuse to be involved in party politics; this is trumped by a desire to abolish prostitution or pornography. That it is these specific issues on which radical feminists are willing to work with

conservatives is important because these tend to be the issues largely ignored or viewed as too controversial for large national women's organizations to campaign on. :

Well, I may not like an individual politician or party but I'll work with whoever I have to in order to make things better for women, especially when it comes to issues like prostitution or violence against women. (Portland)

It's naïve to think that in order to get real change through you won't have to work with people that on every other issue you fundamentally disagree. (London)

For these feminists, the issue trumped any disquiet with regards who they may have to ally themselves with. For instance social conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic have argued in favor of greater censorship regulation in order to address the issue of pornography. Whilst conservative opposition to pornography is based upon the argument that it is not only morally corrupting but also threatens family values; feminist critiques are located within a critique of pornography as a manifestation of oppression and exploitation of women. For the radical feminists I interviewed, this tension was clearly problematic; however, the desire to see progress in the issue was of the utmost importance:

It's true, I feel a little uncomfortable sometimes when you see the swivel-eyed right wingers who are also opposed to prostitution but I think it's important to keep your eye on the larger prize (Bristol)

I guess politics, at least electoral politics, is about compromise and for me the compromise comes in terms of who I'll work with. I may disagree with every other policy issue that some Republicans advocate and I sure as hell wouldn't vote for

them [...] but I can also see that if that's the way to make things happen to get things done then so be it (Portland).

The space between conservative and radical feminist critiques can often provide a site within which conservative women can operate. For instance the Conservative MP Claire Perry was at the forefront of campaigns to introduce internet porn filters, something supported by the End Violence Against Women coalition.^{xv} In the US, where there are only 23 Republican Congresswomen (out of 279 Republican representatives), such campaigns tend to be fronted by men on the right. For instance, the Democrats favor a free and largely unregulated Internet, whilst Mitt Romney, during his 2012 Presidential campaign argued in favor of a filter to block all online pornography.^{xvi}

The interviewees, mainly those who identified as radical feminists stressed the importance of pragmatism in advancing women's rights. Whilst some reflected that it may be 'uncomfortable' working with those who are simultaneously seeking to attack women's reproductive rights, this was particularly true in the US, there was also a recognition that leftist/liberal parties all too often tended to shy away from more contentious issues. Hence, party ideology and feminist ideology interact here but only really amongst those radical feminists and conservative politicians. Large national women's organizations tend to adopt more centrist positions and also tend to focus on less controversial issues. As such, strategic partnerships between radical feminists and conservatives are both possible and necessary.

Conclusion

This article has explored the contemporary relationship between the women's movement and political parties in the US and UK. The research has found that feminist activists echo critiques made by feminist scholars that political parties remain male dominated institutions (Lovenduski, 2005). Moreover, despite recognizing the importance of working with individual politicians, the majority of the interviewees (particularly in the UK) felt detached from political parties. Party and feminist ideology help explain both positive and negative attitudes towards political parties and the extent to which the latter are viewed as both feminist allies and strategic partners. It is clear that leftist partners were more readily identified as being more receptive and committed to advancing women's interests and yet conservative politicians also had a role to play in pursuing issues that tended to divide the women's movement. The analysis has revealed that although there are numerous negative perceptions of parties, and the opportunities they offer feminist activists, this does not extend to individual politicians. Such a view is not necessarily contradictory if the critique is of the parties as institutions rather than of the need for legislative change to pursue feminist goals. However, the emphasis on individual politicians or critical actors is problematic for UK political parties who focus less on the idea of individual representation than is the case in the US.

This comparative analysis has revealed differences in attitudes towards political parties, with those in the UK expressing greater disengagement from the formal process. The critiques made of parties were broadly similar across the two countries, as was the identification of feminist allies and the need for strategic partners. The role for conservative

parties and politicians in advancing the interests (if not underlying ethos) of those most closely associated with radical feminism presents an interesting dimension to the debates concerning the representation of women's and feminist interests. The disengagement and alienation from parties as institutions in and of themselves is perhaps not surprising; however, despite these views, the women's movement have not rejected the formal political process and recognize the importance of working with politicians and parties in multiple ways across a range of issues.

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Appendix A

Interviewees' self-definition by ideology

<i>Ideological strand</i>	<i>US Feminists</i>	<i>British Feminists</i>
Liberal	2	3
Radical	4	13
Socialist	4	8
Black	6	2
Queer*	2	1
Multiple	5	4
None	11	8

N=73. *Queer feminism is influenced by post-structuralist theory which, amongst other things, argues that sex, gender and sexuality are all fluid concepts.

Looking at how the above data broke down comparatively there are 4 key points: 1) British interviewees were three times as likely as US feminists to identify with radical feminism, which was the most commonly cited strand amongst the British participants; 2) in the US a plurality (but not a majority) did not define their own feminism through an ideological

frame; 3) identifying as a black feminist was more common in the US than in Britain; and 4) only a few identified as liberal feminists in either the US or Britain, although we should exercise some caution in over reading this and making wider claims about the death of liberal feminism, given its dominance within large national women's civil society organizations.

ⁱ Leftist parties is the term used in this article to refer to the UK Labour party (but also includes the Greens and the centrist Liberal Democrats) and the US Democrats a liberal-left party.

ⁱⁱ The Equal Rights Amendment was written in 1923 in order to guarantee the equal application of the constitution to all people, regardless of their sex. It was passed by Congress in 1972 but has failed to gain the support of the required number of states necessary (38), in order to ratify the change to the constitution

ⁱⁱⁱ The Fawcett Society (unsuccessfully) sought a judicial review of the government's budget for failing to take gender into account.

^{iv} The use of the label independent refers to those who wish to register themselves as independent not as members of the Independent Party.

^v The data used in this paper was gathered as part of a broader project exploring feminist activism in the US and Britain – see Evans, 2015 forthcoming.

^{vi} Whilst the focus of this article is on feminist ideology, socialization also influences attitudes towards political parties. All of the interviewees were very active in feminist politics although had come to it from different backgrounds. Some had been introduced to feminism at college or University whilst others had become active following personal experiences of gender inequality or sexual violence. Given that all interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, biographical details of the participants are not made available. However, a more sociological approach to exploring feminist attitudes to political parties is an important area for development and indicates a possible future research agenda.

^{vii} In order to make a more fruitful comparison, the focus is on levels of party identification rather than numbers of party members or supporters.

^{viii} The BSA report is available online <http://bsa-30.natcen.ac.uk/read-the-report/politics/introduction.aspx> accessed: 20th October 2014

^{ix} See the Gallup poll, available <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166763/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx> accessed: 20th October 2014.

^x See Leonora O'Neill 'Conservative Feminists Find their Voices' 25th July 2014, available <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/07/24/ozy-conservative-feminists/13087747/> accessed: 20th October 2014. And Amber Rudd and Andrea Leadsom 'You're Wrong Harriet Harman – Conservatives Make Better Feminists' 24th July 2012, available

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/24/harriet-harman-wrong-conservatives-feminists>
accessed 20th October 2014.

^{xi} In 2011 Carolyn Maloney sponsored the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act which eventually became part of the Violence Against Women Act passed in 2013. Amongst other measures the Act strengthened the requirements on the part of schools and colleges to provide counselling, guidance and legal assistance to victims of sexual assault. See Campus SaVE Act FAQs, available online <http://thecampussaveact.com/faq/> accessed: 28th October 2014.

^{xii} See for instance Salon, 'Wendy Davis, Feminist Superhero', available http://www.salon.com/2013/06/26/wendy_davis_feminist_super_hero/ accessed: 28th April 2015

^{xiii} See No More Page 3, available <http://nomorepage3.org/> accessed: 29th October 2014.

^{xiv} See Christopher Hope 'Women Tory MPs Plot Revolution at 150 Year Old Fawcett Society' 13th October 2012, available <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/9605196/Women-Tory-MPs-plot-revolution-at-150-year-old-Fawcett-Society.html> accessed: 20th October 2014.

^{xv} See BBC 'Online pornography to be blocked by default, PM announces' 22nd July 2013, available <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23401076> accessed: 30th October 2014.

^{xvi} See various Mitt Romney speeches, available <http://mittromneycentral.com/?s=Pornography> accessed: 7th November 2014.